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An Overlooked Aspect of Internationalization: Power Blocs and the “Cultural Other” in the Classroom

Ahmad Samarji

Globalization and internationalization are two terms that seem to some to be interchangeable, while in fact they are not. Having argued that, Betty Leask (2008) asserts that it is quite impossible to discuss internationalization without referring to globalization as the latter significantly shapes and impacts internationalization and the way we perceive and facilitate processes prompting it in our everyday teaching and learning practice. Additionally, globalization impacts the strategic plans of governments and education institutions when it comes to internationalization and internationalizing the curriculum (Leask, 2008).

Globalization is not a new concept (Monge, 1998; The Levin Institute, 2016¹). Globalization has been taking place for hundreds of years. However, ICT has dramatically speeded up the processes underpinning globalization in a digitally connected world. While there is no consensus on how to define such a complex term (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 2000; Hardt and Negri 2004), it becomes less complex to view globalization in terms of its processes and forces. As a process, globalization is mainly concerned with ‘interaction and integration’ among the people, companies, institutes and governments of various nations, and such a process is ‘driven by international trade and investment and aided by information technology’ (The Levin Institute, 2016). The forces of globalization have prompted ‘the rapid increase in movement of people, money, services, goods, images and ideas around the world’ (Leask, 2008, p. 10). Our education systems had to respond to the processes and forces of globalization through internationalization and internationalizing of the curricula.

Like globalization, internationalization means different things to different people (Knight, 1997). Nevertheless, internationalization is commonly perceived as a ‘positive force’ essential for developing students’ ‘inter-cultural competence’ (Leask, 2008, p. 10) so that they can be well-prepared and equipped to participate in an ‘increasingly globalised society’ (Leask, 2009:3). Many education institutes are implementing policies and strategies to internationalize their curriculum in response to the increasing demands of globalization (De Wit and Leask, 2017). A number of education institutes believe that internationalization is ‘bringing people from different backgrounds and cultures together on campus’ (Leask, 2009:3) and supporting them and catering for their needs in issues such as cultural societies, prayer rooms, and food, in addition to facilitating exchange programs (Clifford, 2009). Hence, internationalization of education—school and higher education—is clearly and strongly connected to globalization, but ‘the relationship is complex, multifaceted and, for some at least, problematic’ (Leask, 2008, p. 10).

One of the dimensions to the relationship between internationalization and globalization is how we respond to the “cultural other” in our classrooms, institutes, exchange programs, etc. (Leask, 2008). Sanderson (2004) argues that such a response is complicated by our fear of the threatening “cultural other”, fear of the unknown. In the context of this commentary, I would like

¹ Online Resource: <http://www.globalization101.org/what-is-globalization/>

to adopt a more comprehensive working definition of the term “cultural other” to include students who are not only from a different race, ethnicity, and country, but are also from different districts within the one country, socioeconomic status (SES), belief systems, gender, and academic capabilities. Hence, I am a strong believer of the common stance of culture as being the ‘social heredity passed on by social groups’ (Ottaway, 2013, p. 50). In our classrooms, we can easily identify groups of students who perceive things and behave in a particular way because they either come from a liberal or conservative background, are excelling or underachieving students, are from a metropolitan or regional area, and/or belong to a low, middle, or high SES. Hence, in our schools, classrooms are often populated by the “cultural others” who perceive things differently as they have different/unique ways of seeing, knowing, and interrelating with knowledge, classroom activities, and the whole school climate (Spring, 2017). Universities are no different from schools. Unsurprisingly, they are often characterized by more cultural diversity including features that are not common to schools such as cultural differences relating to age (e.g. mature age students), occupation, political affiliation, etc.

Claims by teachers, educators, and academics that their teaching and learning practices address and respond to globalization are now widespread. They strive to prepare their students to become global citizens and equip them with a degree of ‘intercultural competence’ (Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007: 415), where they can survive within a global economy and an interconnected world (Bourn, 2009). They assume that they are “doing their bit” towards preparing global-ready students by introducing some form of multiculturalism within the curriculum (Haigh, 2000).

While I am confident that such practices serve internationalization and prompt intercultural competence, they often overlook a comprehensive view of the “cultural other” which includes cultural differences that exist within local students. I strongly believe that there are few basic practices that teachers and instructors can implement inside their classrooms at schools and universities to prompt a positive, tolerant, and more accepting attitude-behaviour change towards the “cultural other”. Such practices do not require thinking “outside the box” but rather “inside the box.”

In our classrooms and among our local students, “power blocs” may exist as a result of cultural differences. To understand power blocs, it is of benefit to refer to the notion of power in this context. In plain language, ‘power denotes a power “over” or a power “to”’, where the former term refers to ‘an asymmetrical relationship in which one person or group has some control over another’ and such power can be ‘economic, social, political, and cultural’ and can ‘relate to individuals and locals as well as societal or global communities’ (Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, 2010, p. 713). On the other hand, the latter term, “power to”, denotes someone’s ability to ‘assert oneself autonomously among others to make one’s own choices and act accordingly’ (Mills et al., 2010, p. 713). I am particularly referring here to the notion of “power over” within a cultural setting, where students form blocs or closed groups as they exercise their membership to a certain culture: racial, ethnic, SES, residence, capability, belief system, etc. Nevertheless, power blocs do not necessarily need to be hegemonic. It would be expected that certain power blocs might emerge in response to a fear of being isolated or marginalized by already existing blocs. For instance, underachieving students in mathematics might feel isolated/ignored by a power bloc of excelling students in the subject and as a result might consciously or subconsciously form a group against the “cultural others”, the math nerds.

In their argument about multiculturalism and power, Steinberg and Kincheloe (2009, p. 8) assert that power is embedded within ‘social frameworks of race, gender, occupations, and everyday interaction and communication’. They argue (2009) that such power blocs are created around members of the same group sharing common frameworks, interests, and/or conceptions such as racial, ethnic, and occupational groups, where the success of teachers in promoting diversity and multiculturalism lies—to a greater extent—in understanding the power blocs which may exist in their classrooms and how such power blocs are samples of the larger power blocs which exist in the society.

In my commentary, I adopt Steinberg’s and Kincheloe’s notion of power blocs in our classrooms; nonetheless, I go a step further to argue for smoothing the boundaries between these power blocs so that the “cultural other” is less feared and ignored as a starting point and more engaged and valued at later stages. In other words, in my paper, I assert that teachers should work to shift the “power over” attitude and behaviors to “power to” practices as students empower themselves and others as they relate to common themes, interests and goals rather than common biological or social hereditary traits.

I strongly believe that prompting and promoting multiculturalism and global citizenship in education starts with the effective—yet overlooked—step of combatting power blocs inside our classrooms. Such a step is an inexpensive one and does not require funding nor the whole administrative procedures associated with exchange programs and transnational education. It simply requires careful pedagogical planning to ensure that the students work together in groups based on their interests in specific topics rather than their loyalty/membership to a specific power bloc.

In addition to race and ethnicity, power blocs, in our classrooms, can be created around students of the same gender (e.g. males vs. females), SES (e.g. privileged vs. underprivileged students), residence (e.g. students from metropolitan areas vs. those from regional areas), capability (e.g. highly capable vs. moderately capable vs. underperforming students), and/or belief systems (e.g. students from religion A vs. those from religion B). The challenge for the teachers and instructors is to blur the boundaries between power blocs that might exist inside their classrooms. By doing so, teachers and instructors will often face resistance and complaints from students when asked to join groups outside of their power blocs. Such students might feel anxious and uncertain as they are pushed outside their comfort zone/safe power bloc to move to another diverse group and closely work and collaborate with the “cultural other(s)” to finish a certain task or undertake a project.

As they embark on their task, students in those diverse groups will start socializing and sharing anecdotes and experiences. At this stage, I am confident that the “cultural” boundaries between those students will start blurring. The boundaries will further weaken and might vanish once students from those culturally-rich groups start achieving the learning outcomes set by the teacher/instructor and start cherishing and valuing such a successful experience.

Beyond reasonable doubt, teachers and instructors should not always expect a “happy ending” to such an approach. Facilitating the work of such diverse groups of students is not probably an

easy task. Teachers and instructors are expected to not only coach the students but also intervene if they identify any behavioural issues or interpersonal conflicts inside the group. The more students from different/competing power blocs get along with one another and become more focused on completing the task or project at hand, the less the need is for the teacher or instructor to intervene after new mateships/friendships have been established around common interests and goals. Those new mates and/or friends can now serve as ‘avant-garde’ when they return back to their families and communities, where they can stand up to challenge the stereotypes, labels, and anecdotes that target the “cultural other.”

In my commentary, I am in no way advocating against or undermining the importance of internationalizing our curriculum through the content delivered, discussion topics, field trips, and multicultural and international experiences (e.g. exchange programs). However, as an educator and academic, I remain mostly concerned that we might overlook the obvious or tacit local power blocs represented inside our classrooms as we spend too much time and effort thinking globally. I am a strong believer that an attitude-behavior change towards more tolerance and acceptance of the “cultural other” starts inside our classroom and immediate community and that with every boundary we blur/break between power blocs, we truly become a step closer towards internationalization and multiculturalism. I am afraid—and will say it bluntly—that thinking too much ‘outside the box’ and overlooking what is going inside the box, the classroom in this instance, might put future multicultural and transnational experiences at risk of ending up as superficial experiences that conclude with a few selfies, Facebook posts, and memories that will soon fade once the participants return back home and default back to their power blocs at instances where they are truly required to stand up for the “other”.

I want to conclude my commentary informed by Betty Leask’s paper “*Beside Me is an Empty Chair*” (2009) to strongly argue that it is about time that we consider blurring boundaries between students from different/competing power blocs inside our classrooms. We should not leave room for our students to perceive empty chairs beside them as they respect, appreciate, and acknowledge the different values, needs, perspectives, and preferences of their “culturally other” peers in their ongoing journey towards global citizenship.

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